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The Archeology of Americanization

Assimilation and Changing Identity of Phoenix Indian School Pupils

Once Native Americans were confined to reservations in the 1880s, the federal government embarked on a plan to bring about the disappearance of North American Indians, not by military means, but by Americanizing their children in the hope disappearance would occur through assimilation. Indian people experienced a variety of problems that set them apart which the government tried to solve. Most Indians of that period could not communicate in English, could neither live a traditional life (rely to some degree on hunted and gathered foods), nor productively work in the off-reservation economy, suffered from disease and health problems through ignorance of proper sanitation and health care, and did not desire to become patriotic American citizens. The education of Native American children "promised" to correct these problems. Off-reservation boarding schools were the primary instrument of the federal government's education of Indian children, and to a large extent they assisted in bringing Native American tribes into the 20th century by providing the means for them to interact with and become a part of the larger American culture. The clash of Native and Anglo-American cultures intensified in the school setting and had profound effects on the identities of Indian children. Some of those effects are still felt today.

Removal of the running track and football field that covered the historic Phoenix Indian School dump.View looking north.

The Phoenix Indian School was one of over a hundred boarding schools established at the turn of the century. One early-20th-century pupil described how the school experience contributed to her own personal growth and recognized how her time at school fundamentally changed her concept of the world: the courses of study at the school were not designed to make whites of Indians, as is sometimes charged, but to give young Indian students a basic education in the three R's, to acquaint them with the rudiments of many different trades, and to introduce them to the world off the Indian reservation. The real value of such an education contributes to the general growth of the student, and it is always gratifying that an appreciable number of these Indians can and do discover who they are as individuals and thus learn what they would like to contribute to the world (Ann Phelps Kopta, cited in Shaw 1974:xiii-xiv).

Formal recognition of the school's mission to change the identity of Indian children is permanently inscribed on the monument in front of Memorial Hall to classmates who died in World War I. The inscription also indicates the pupils had a separate identity that should be recognized by the dominant culture.

The Indian will become an asset or a liability as we cultivate or fail to cultivate his body, mind, and soul with a view to fitting him for an honorable place in our social and economic structure. The purpose of this school is to introduce Indian youth to the opportunities and responsibilities of civilization and to acquaint his Caucasian brother with the sterling qualities of the Native

Dresden Stone China maker's mark dated 1895 from white ware serving dishes recovered from the Phoenix Indian School dump.

American (published in the Native American 23[23]:277).

Pupils who went there recall it affected them both negatively and positively. The often painful separation of Indian children from their parents on reservations and strict instruction in the ways of the off-reservation world that would make them productive American citizens led to permanent changes in identity. Artifacts, records of the school (including its newspaper), biographical accounts of employees and students, and historical accounts of school life indicate only some aspects of a pupil's identity changed while much of the identity brought from home resisted change.

Ideology

Americanization or Anglo-conformity covers the variety of views of maintaining the English language, English institutions, and English-oriented cultural patterns that was particularly prevalent in the 1880s and 1890s when federal boarding schools were established. This ideology persisted and was especially strong during the years up to and during World War I. It was a movement to rapidly strip immigrants of foreign culture and make them over into Americans along Anglo-Saxon lines. Immigrants were taught English, to forget former origins and culture, and to be fervently patriotic. Americanization educational programs taught the foreign-born to understand American political institutions, how to become naturalized, and to embrace patriotic sentiments.

The philosophy of educating Native American children was in many ways a distinct manifestation of the Americanization ideology. Gordon (1964:106) described Americanization during World War I as demanding a rapid personal transformation and a draconian and abrupt detachment from the cultural patterns and memories of the homeland. In federal boarding schools it meant that the elementary right of self-respect was denied through the practice of addressing traditional Indian practice with contempt and ignoring stabilizing ties to home that made the Indian pupil a person in the sociological sense. Americanization widened the gap between immigrant parents and their children. Boarding school children found that their return to the reservation was made difficult because new knowledge made them critical or intolerant of traditional practices.

Americanization on the Navajo reservation from the 1880s to the 1920s was recently discussed by Helms (CRM 5:11-12) regarding school building architecture. She found that although a few federally-built schools incorporated Navajo traditions in construction, most buildings reflect insensitivity to traditional architectural elements.

The Americanization of Indian children at the Phoenix Indian School meant their school curriculum differed from that other contemporaneous Phoenix schools because the students were being educated to be a part of a society that was very different from that of their parents. Although Indians were technically "Americans," they were perceived and treated as "foreign" by the dominant culture. The Americanization of Indians meant that new and different values and customs were introduced to Indians pupils, some of which conflicted with what their parents had taught them (e.g., religion).

Artifacts and Changing Identity

The Phoenix Indian School Archeological Project was one of the outcomes of an act of Congress, Public Law 100-696, signed by President Ronald Reagan in November 1988, that closed the school and sought to divide the ownership of the property as part of a land exchange. The Bureau of Indian Affairs had operated the school, but when it closed, the administration of the property passed to the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

The Department of the Interior plans to transfer ownership of a portion of property to Barron-Collier Companies, a private land developer in Florida, and in return it will receive 115,000 acres of land owned by Barron-Collier to add to Everglades National Park, Florida. Barron-Collier will also establish a $35 million trust fund for the education of Indian children in Arizona. The remaining portion of the Phoenix Indian School property will be divided among the city of Phoenix for an urban park, the Arizona State Veterans Home, and the Veterans Administration for expansion of its hospital facilities adjacent to the school property.

Recent excavation of the Phoenix Indian School trash dump by Arizona State University's Department of Anthropology uncovered items that date between the school's opening in 1892 to about 1924. Archeological items from the dump provide distinctive evidence of subtle and lasting

changes in Indian children's identity that resulted from American assimilation.

Historic artifacts from the school's dump indicate the outcome of Indian assimilation was not conformity but a variation of the melting pot. The assimilative goal was to thrust the Indian and non-Indian together in a context devoid of "Indian" culture, values, and identity to remake the individual into a "non-Indian". The outcome was educated Indian children who incorporated parts of a school-learned American identity with the identity they brought with them. The government Indian boarding school provided the first place where many Indian people learned of the existence of other Indian tribes and their separate, "special" treatment by the government. More than any other institution, these schools, actively or passively, created the environment that cultivated and strengthened the idea of an "Indian" identity apart from one's individual tribe.

All of the outward signs of their home background were stripped away by school policies of forbidding Indian speech, religion, and clothing. Their "home identity," tied to traditional Indian ways of living, radically contrasted their "school identity," which was the planned outcome of federal Indian education policy to provide the rudiments of an academic education (read, write, speak English), to develop individual identity apart from tribe, clan, or family, to Christianize, and to teach citizenship. The clearest archeological evidence of identity change was tied to education in sanitation and health care.

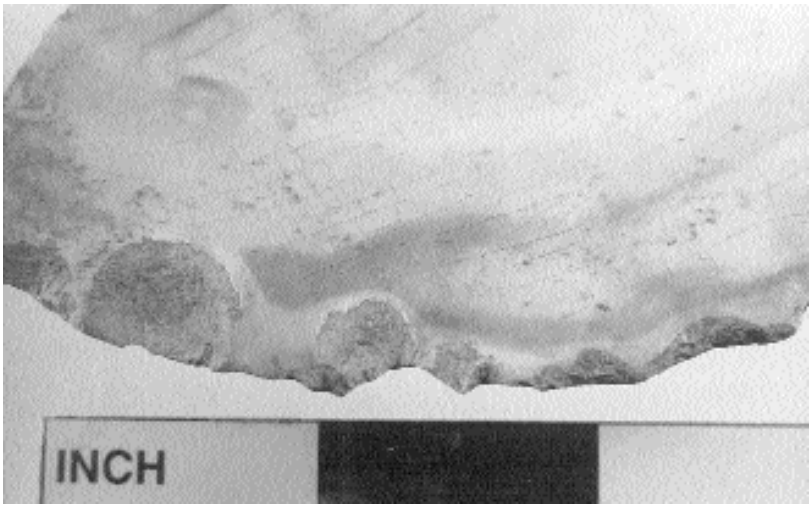
Comb recovered from the Phoenix Indian School dump marked with pupil's name, "Bateman."

The many artifacts that marked outward changes in the pupils so that they appeared to be assimilated were the result of improvement of personal hygiene and health. Clothing was preserved as military buttons from uniforms and glass buttons from dresses. Traditional clothing was confiscated upon pupils' arrival and substituted with clothing that reflected military discipline and conformity. School clothing represents the introduction of an intensity and style of discipline not known at home. Military discipline, including marching in uniform with rifles, was used to control the large numbers of children at the school as well as to teach pupils responsibility, leadership, cleanliness, and self esteem. Regular laundering of clothing by students at school contrasted the lower hygiene associated with traditional clothing. Both girls and boys were taught to make clothing of the dominant culture that had the effect of providing a useful skill and perpetuating the outward conformity to the dominant culture when children returned to the reservation. Helen Sekapueptewa's recollection (Udall 1969:144) of her return from the Phoenix Indian School exemplifies this type of change in identity when she refused to abide her family's wishes to remove the school clothes she wore and wear Hopi attire.

Broken dishes were abundant in the trash dump and were objects that fundamentally changed how pupils viewed the organization of traditional family meals. The use of dishes and eating utensils at school instilled in the student lessons of social order, courtesy, and health awareness ritually three times a day. One of the most unusual experiences confronting the pupils was that of the dining hall. Not only was the kind of food served in the dining hall different from home, but the manner in which it was served (on dishes), the way it was expected to be consumed (with utensils shared among a table with permanently assigned seating), its quantity, and its regularity in appearance starkly contrasted with reservation meals. The large quantity and regularity of meals was primarily intended to keep pupils healthy, especially in a context where deadly diseases (pneumonia, measles, tuberculosis) existed with a degree of frequency. The context of serving and consuming food, however, had as lasting an impact on pupils as the kinds and quantities of food they ate. On the reservation, food often was consumed in a family setting, sitting around a hearth sharing from a communal vessel. Eating was probably done with the hands. This image contrasts with the image of row after row of dining

tables set with plates and utensils, each pupil in his or her assigned place. While the manner of eating off plates with forks and knives was intended to be taught as the "civilized" way to eat, it also was a more sanitary way to eat, inhibiting the transmission of disease. Each pupil literally had his or her own place and utensils, which, after use, were thoroughly cleaned by other students. Cleanliness and sanitation were lessons, taught to pupils by dining hall matrons, that became associated with dishes. Once pupils became accustomed to eating food and the sanitary customs of the dining hall, it was difficult or impossible for many to return home and eat food in a communal manner.

A steam whistle found in the dump was an object that regulated the behavior and made pupils conform to the school identity the government intended them to acquire. The freedom of unregulated time on the reservation contrasted with the order imposed by whistle blasts. At school, not only was free time virtually nonexistent, but the day was divided into activities whose occurrence was regulated by blasts of the steam whistle. Responding to the whistle blasts introduced the student to the need to be on time and the demands of the clock to keep to a schedule.



Close-up of flake scars from a bifacially flaked dessert plate, from the Phoenix Indian School dump.

The discovery of combs and toothbrushes marked with students' names illustrates one of the subtle changes of identity. A school policy was to develop an identity in pupils that they could be self-reliant individuals; this distinctly contrasted the Native importance attached to kinship and community obligations learned at home. Education in dental hygiene and the dangers of transmitting germs encouraged pupils to clearly mark their own toothbrushes. Toothbrushes recovered from the dump were either marked in ink with names very apparent or names were engraved or scratched that were barely visible. Barely visible markings are a subtle reflection of the acquisition of the lesson of individual ownership while more apparent marks were intended to signal ownership in a public context. Both kinds of markings attest to the varying application of the notion of individuality.

Few artifacts marked the persistence of pupils to retain the identity they brought with them from home. Practicing aboriginal religion, defining oneself in traditional ways, and practicing traditional technology (stone working) were aspects of the "home identity" expressed by students at school. The practice of aboriginal religion was forbidden. Religious objects such as effigies or fetishes had to be brought from home and hidden because if discovered by school employees, the objects would have been confiscated and discarded. While historic records make no mention of the practice of native religion on campus, the archeological recovery of miniature clay representations of animals (a bird, a four-legged animal) and a small smoothed non-local pebble that could have been a fetish indicate some pupils might have continued their Native practices in secret.

Defining oneself in traditional ways may be another expression of home identity. Southwestern pottery marks tribal affiliation by distinctions in color and form. Since pottery making was not one of the industrial arts initially taught at the school, we were surprised to discover sherds of historic Indian pottery. Pupils probably brought sherds with them from home. Distinct colors and patterns on the sherds would have reminded the child of home. Another possible indication of defining oneself in traditional ways was reflected in a few of the markings on personal items. Rather than using the "American" name to mark their comb or toothbrush, some pupils choose to mark items with dates or a simple line. In marking items this way, pupils may have intended to guard their name, because the traditional view among many southwestern cultures of one's name is that it is personal and secret and not to be told. One who knows your name is said to have power over you.

The final way some pupils expressed their home identity was by practicing traditional stone working technology.

Vocational classes comprised half the curriculum and shops existed that were stocked with modern tools and mechanical equipment. Practicing traditional technology could have been

a response to the domination of modern technology in shop classes. The presence of traditional Native American woodworking tools in the trash were fashioned by students for their own use. Obtaining suitable stone raw material probably was difficult (only one crude stone projectile point was found) but items in the school's trash provided easily obtainable materials that could be flaked or worked in the same manner as stone. Fashioning tools of their own making, such as window glass scrapers and retouched bottle neck spokeshaves, made a connection to home. The most unusual connection to home is indicated by several bifacially flaked dinner plates that were not used as tools, but simply reflect the practice of traditional tool making technology.

Americanization

The Americanization of Indians was intended to lead to their greater self-sufficiency and gradual absorption into American society. Education brought awareness of American cultural diversity and the historic role of government in attempting to solve Indian problems. A positive outcome of Indian education is that Native Americans could now be able to solve their problems themselves.

The need to get along with Indians from different tribes as well as non-Indians, the knowledge of their special treatment by the federal government, and the alienation some felt when they returned home, led the pupils to create a new "Indian" identity that was the product of the assimilation of ideas from Indians and non-Indians. Historian Hazel Hertzberg (1971) argues that the roots of modern pan-Indianism are found in the forces that were created and grew in the last two decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century. The major theme of modern pan-Indian movements "was accommodation to and acceptance of white society as permanent, rather than emphasis upon a vain hope of a return to aboriginal conditions through whatever means" (Herzberg 1971:14). Among the leaders of this movement (the American Indian Association, the first group to limit its membership to Native Americans, began in 1911) were students who had returned from non-reservation boarding schools who served as interpreters and conveyers of the movements' ideas. Hertzberg (1971:15) identified educational opportunity as the single most important element in stimulating Pan-Indianism. Through education, a large and diverse group of Indians arose who shared a common language—English—and common experience in the Indian and white worlds (expanded further by later employment in the Federal Indian Service). Boarding schools taught ideas and exposed pupils to experiences that forced pupils to redefine themselves as Indians and to work out their relationship with whites.

While the boarding schools exposed the pupil to the clash of culture that is part of the modern world, they did not provide proper preparation to the pupil to identify his or her self as both a tribal member and an American citizen.

Americanization also led to the development of new problems for Native Americans students: prejudice, racism, discrimination, and loss of self esteem because of their ignorance of Indian history and culture. The importance of preparation for the inevitable clash of Native and dominant cultures is now realized. Even before boarding schools bean to be phased out, reservation schools were being opened so children need not be separated from their parents. The education missing from the boarding school in Native language, lifestyle, history, and culture is now imparted in reservation schools as well as by parents. Because the schools are located close to the home, parents can assume their important role as teachers and reinforce elements of Native culture that are critical ingredients for building and keeping self esteem. Today, Indian children can rely on both their parents and reservation-based schools to educate them in both Native and American values and traditions and to provide guidance so that they can make their own decisions in making a life in the modern world.

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Photos by the author.